IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

"Gender Perspectives On Existential Anxiety And Meaning In Life In Young Adults"

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Abstract: Existential anxiety, which stems from an awareness of life's uncertainties like death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, is a key focus in psychological research. While distressing, existential anxiety also serves as a motivator for individuals to seek meaning in their lives. Psychological literature highlights two key dimensions of meaning in life: presence of meaning, the perception that one's life has purpose and coherence, and search for meaning, the active exploration of life's significance. Research suggests that the presence of meaning is associated with psychological well-being, resilience, and lower distress, whereas the search for meaning can either facilitate personal growth or lead to existential distress, depending on how it is pursued. This dissertation examines the relationship between existential anxiety and meaning in life through psychological frameworks such as Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, self-determination theory, and terror management theory. By analyzing how individuals experience and search for meaning, this study aims to provide insights into the role of meaning in coping with existential concerns and its implications for mental well-being.

Chapter – 1 Introduction

The concept of meaning in life has been extensively studied in psychological literature, with researchers often distinguishing between two key dimensions: the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). These two constructs capture different aspects of how individuals engage with meaning and its role in psychological well-being.

Presence of Meaning

The presence of meaning refers to the extent to which an individual perceives their life as purposeful, coherent, and significant (Steger et al., 2006). Individuals with a strong sense of meaning often report greater life satisfaction, emotional stability, and resilience in the face of adversity (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Research suggests that the presence of meaning is associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression, as it provides individuals with a cognitive and emotional framework for interpreting their experiences in a positive and integrated manner (Martela & Steger, 2016).

Several psychological theories emphasize the importance of meaning for overall well-being. For example, Viktor Frankl's (1985) logotherapy argues that meaning is a fundamental human drive and that a lack of meaning can lead to existential frustration and distress. Similarly, self- determination theory (Deci & Ryan,

2000) posits that a sense of purpose contributes to intrinsic motivation and psychological fulfillment. Individuals who experience high levels of meaning in life often demonstrate greater autonomy, competence, and relatedness key factors for well-being according to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Search for Meaning

The search for meaning represents an individual's active exploration of life's purpose and significance. Unlike the presence of meaning, which reflects a stable sense of meaning, searching for meaning implies an ongoing quest, which may arise from curiosity, existential questioning, or life crises (Steger et al., 2008). While searching for meaning can be a positive and growth-oriented process, it is also associated with psychological distress when individuals struggle to find satisfying answers (Park, 2010).

Empirical research has yielded mixed findings on the psychological effects of searching for meaning. Some studies suggest that individuals engaged in meaning-seeking experience higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty, particularly when they are unable to establish a coherent sense of purpose (Steger et al., 2008). However, others argue that the search for meaning can lead to personal growth and deeper existential fulfillment, particularly when it is accompanied by successful meaning-making processes (Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). This aligns with existentialist perspectives, which propose that actively engaging with life's uncertainties is essential for authentic living (Yalom, 1980).

The interplay between presence and search for meaning is complex and context-dependent. Some researchers view the search for meaning as a response to an absence of meaning, suggesting that individuals who feel their lives lack purpose are more likely to engage in meaning-seeking behaviors (Steger et al., 2008). Others argue that searching for meaning is not necessarily indicative of distress but can instead reflect a proactive engagement with existential questions, leading to a deeper and more nuanced sense of purpose over time (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009).

Overall, the presence and search for meaning represent two distinct but interrelated processes. Understanding their interaction is crucial for examining how individuals navigate existential anxiety and construct meaningful lives. This dissertation will explore these dimensions within psychological frameworks to provide a deeper understanding of their role in mental well-being.

Existential Anxiety

Existential anxiety is a fundamental aspect of human experience, arising from an awareness of life's uncertainties, such as death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). Unlike clinical anxiety, which is often tied to specific threats, existential anxiety stems from deeper philosophical concerns about the nature of existence itself. It manifests as distress when individuals confront the fragility of life, the unpredictability of the future, and the search for a purposeful existence. While existential anxiety can be unsettling, it also serves as a powerful motivator for personal growth and the pursuit of meaning (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2020).

The importance of meaning in life has been widely recognized in psychological research as a crucial factor for mental well-being. Studies have shown that individuals who perceive their lives as meaningful experience greater psychological resilience, life satisfaction, and lower levels of distress (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Meaning provides a cognitive framework that helps individuals interpret their experiences, navigate adversity, and maintain a sense of coherence in an unpredictable world (Park, 2010). The absence of meaning, on the other hand, has been linked to existential despair, depression, and even suicidal ideation (Heisel & Flett, 2014).

In contemporary society, the search for meaning has become particularly relevant due to rapid cultural and technological changes. Modern life, characterized by increasing individualism, secularization, and shifting social norms, has led many to question traditional sources of meaning, such as religion or communal values (Baumeister, 1991). As a result, individuals must actively construct their own sense of purpose, which can be both liberating and anxiety-inducing.

Understanding how people find and maintain meaning in life is essential for addressing the existential concerns that contribute to mental health challenges today. This dissertation explores existential anxiety through the lens of meaning in life, focusing on two key dimensions: presence of meaning (the extent to which individuals feel their lives have purpose) and search for meaning (the active pursuit of meaning). By examining these concepts within established psychological frameworks, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate existential concerns and their implications for mental well-being.

Causes of Anxiety

Young people today are dealing with more stress despite their lives seeming easier than before. The time between childhood and becoming an adult is now longer and more confusing; lasting up to 15 years.

During this time, young people must navigate school, jobs, living arrangements, and relationships. As life gets better in some ways, it also gets more complicated, making it harder for young people to feel okay mentally and socially. University related stress especially in medical and nursing fields can lead to anxiety and depression among students due to high workloads and practical components, like fieldwork. Some students may not fully understand the demands of their studies until they begin, causing feelings of disillusionment. International students may initially face higher anxiety levels but adjust over time.

Anxiety and depression can change as students go through university, from adjusting to new routines to worrying about what comes after graduation. Poor academic performance can worsen mental health, creating a cycle of stress and low grades. On the flip side, students who work part- time tend to have better mental health because they feel more financially secure and emotionally stable. However, too much work and how well they get along with teachers can still cause stress and anxiety.

Family dynamics, including parental expectations, parental divorce status, whether parents argue a lot, or if they don't pay enough attention, can really affect how children feel. If families aren't working well or if children don't feel close to their family members, they might feel insecure, lonely, or have low self-worth. This can make children and young people more likely to feel anxious or sad.

Social media and digital technology have changed how we connect, but they also bring new problems. Seeing perfect lives online, cyber bullying and pressure to look perfect can induce feelings of low self- worth and increase anxiety and depression. Recent research6 explored how social media use is connected to feeling sad, worried, or stressed, taking into account time spent on social media, what you do, how much you care, and addiction.

Young adults today deal with tough economic issues like high unemployment rates, student debt, and housing problems. Unstable jobs mostly harm mental health by affecting time management, relationships, purpose, and self-image, which are all tied to mental well-being. Plus, insecure jobs don't give the financial perks of work, increasing mental health risks.

Chapter – 2 Methodology

Study Design - This study will adopt a cross-sectional research design to assess gender perspectives on existential anxiety and meaning in life in young adults.

Samplings

Participants – The study will target a diverse sample of young adults aged 18 to 30 years from various socio-economic backgrounds and cultural contexts.

Sample Size – A sample size calculation will be performed based on statistical power considerations, aiming for a sufficiently large and representative sample to detect meaningful relationships.

Instruments/ Tools

The Existential Anxiety Questionnaire - (EAQ) measured anxiety related to core existential concerns such as death, isolation, meaninglessness and freedom. It assesses how individuals emotionally respond to these themes.

Meaning in Life - (MIL) will be administered to assess the presence and source for meaning in life.

Causes of Anxiety - Anxiety can arise from various sources, including biological predispositions, psychological vulnerabilities, and environmental stressors. However, from an existential perspective, anxiety often stems from deeper concerns related to human existence such as the fear of death, feelings of isolation, the search for meaning, and the burden of personal freedom and responsibility. These fundamental life issues can evoke emotional responses when individuals confront uncertainty, lack of direction, or existential conflicts. When unresolved, such concerns may lead to heightened anxiety as individuals struggle to find purpose, connection, and coherence in their lives.

Data Analysis -

Statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS software.
Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for scores on the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ) and the Meaning in Life (MIL) scale.

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between existential anxiety and meaning in life.

Additionally, a One-Way ANOVA was performed to compare levels of existential anxiety and meaning in life across different demographic groups, such as age, gender, and other relevant categories.

The analysis also examined key sources of anxiety, with particular focus on existential themes like fear of death, isolation, feelings of meaninglessness, and the burden of freedom, as measured by the EAQ.

Ethical Considerations -

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines outlined by ethics committees.

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences.

Appropriate measures will be implemented to safeguard participants' privacy and maintain the security of data throughout the processes of collection, storage, and analysis.

Implications -

The findings of this study will enhance our understanding of the psychological factors influencing existential anxiety and the pursuit of meaning in young adults.

By identifying gender differences in how existential concerns are experienced and how meaning in life is constructed, the study can inform the development of gender-sensitive interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being.

Insights from this research will be valuable for mental health professionals, educators, and counselors, helping them design more effective programs and therapeutic approaches that support young adults in navigating existential challenges.

The study will also contribute to the theoretical understanding of how existential anxiety interacts with the presence and search for meaning, potentially guiding future research in existential psychology and mental health.

Chapter - 3

Results Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed for the Existential Anxiety and Meaning in Life scores across gender. The results are summarized below:

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Existential Anxiety	Female	75	6.17	2.71
Existential Anxiety	Male	75	5.20	2.73
Meaning in Life	Female	75	24.44	3.64
Meaning in Life	Male	75	25.67	4.08

One-Way ANOVA: Gender and Existential Anxiety

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine gender differences in existential anxiety. The analysis revealed a statistically significant effect of gender on existential anxiety, $F(1, 148) = 4.812$, $p = .030$, indicating that females reported significantly higher existential anxiety than males.

One-Way ANOVA: Gender and Meaning in Life

To assess gender differences in meaning in life, another one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results showed no significant difference between males and females, $F(1, 148) = 3.770$, $p = .054$. Although females had slightly lower average scores, the difference was not statistically significant.

Pearson Correlation: Existential Anxiety and Meaning in Life

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between existential anxiety and meaning in life. The correlation was very weak and negative, $r = –0.057$, and not statistically significant ($p = .485$). This suggests that, in this sample, existential anxiety and meaning in life were not meaningfully associated.

Causes of Existential Anxiety: Gender-wise Response Analysis

Participants were asked seven yes/no questions to assess specific causes of existential anxiety. Table 1 presents the percentage of 'Yes' and 'No' responses by gender and total sample.

Notably, a higher percentage of females (61.3%) than males (38.7%) reported anxiety about not meeting societal expectations. Similarly, both males (73.3%) and females (77.3%) expressed high concern about not meeting family expectations.

Academic or professional pressure was a notable trigger, with 63.3% of the total sample responding 'Yes.' Questions related to spiritual beliefs (62.7%) and global issues (57.3%) also had substantial affirmative responses.

Interestingly, a significant gender difference was observed in the tendency to compare oneself with others: 53.3% of females versus 38.7% of males responded 'Yes.' These findings reinforce that existential concerns are shaped by a mix of societal, familial, and internal pressures, with gender-based differences worth deeper exploration.

Q.No	Question	Gender	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Are you worried about not meeting societal expectations?	Male	38.7%	61.3%
		Female	61.3%	38.7%
		Total	50.0%	50.0%
2	Are you worried about not meeting family expectations?	Male	73.3%	26.7%
		Female	77.3%	22.7%
		Total	75.3%	24.7%
3	Do global issues make you reflect on the significance of your life?	Male	57.3%	42.7%
		Female	57.3%	42.7%
		Total	57.3%	42.7%
4	Do academic or professional pressures lead you to doubt your purpose in life?	Male	60.0%	40.0%
		Female	66.7%	33.3%
		Total	63.3%	36.7%
5	Do you think that lacking spiritual beliefs leads to feelings of emptiness?	Male	66.7%	33.3%
		Female	58.7%	41.3%
		Total	62.7%	37.3%
6	Has the experience of loss or trauma	Male	53.3%	46.7%
	caused you to question the purpose of	Female	54.7%	45.3%

	life?	Total	54.0%	46.0%
7	Does comparing yourself to others make you question your purpose in life?	Male	38.7%	61.3%
		Female	53.3%	46.7%
		Total	46.0%	54.0%

Chapter – 4

Discussion

The present study found that female participants reported significantly higher levels of existential anxiety (EA) than their male counterparts. This result reinforces findings from recent literature that highlight gender disparities in anxiety-related symptoms and disorders. Studies have consistently shown that women are more likely to experience generalized anxiety, mood disturbances, and stress-related symptoms compared to men (Arcand et al., 2023; Meng, 2023). Our findings extend this pattern into the specific realm of existential anxiety distress that emerges from awareness of mortality, isolation, freedom, and the perceived lack of life meaning.

Several psychological and emotional mechanisms may help explain this gender difference. One factor is affect intensity the extent to which individuals experience emotions deeply and vividly. Women generally report higher affect intensity, which could make them more vulnerable to existential concerns and internal dilemmas (Wadhawan et al., 2021). This heightened emotional sensitivity may lead to greater awareness of existential themes such as life's purpose, personal freedom, and mortality. Furthermore, women are typically more emotionally expressive and introspective, making them more likely to reflect on and report feelings related to existential unease (Zhang et al., 2024).

Beyond emotional predispositions, social and cultural influences are also significant contributors. From early development, gender socialization practices often shape emotional responses and coping styles. Girls are more frequently encouraged to explore and articulate their emotions, while boys are typically taught to suppress vulnerability and adopt stoic attitudes (Meng, 2023). This socialization may lead women to engage more actively with existential questions seeking meaning, authenticity, and connection which can, in turn, amplify experiences of existential anxiety.

Sociostructural stressors also add a vital dimension to understanding gender differences in EA. Women continue to face systemic barriers including gender-based discrimination, wage inequality, limited access to leadership roles, and a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities (Arcand et al., 2023). These structural challenges can compromise one's sense of freedom, agency, and life direction factors that are closely related to existential well-being. The inability to make autonomous, meaningful life choices due to external constraints may intensify existential distress, especially in women who perceive themselves as lacking control or fulfillment in life.

Biological and hormonal factors offer another important layer of explanation. Research indicates that fluctuations in estrogen and other sex hormones can influence emotional regulation and stress sensitivity (Zhang et al., 2024). Such biological predispositions may interact with psychosocial variables, making women more susceptible to emotionally charged experiences, including existential anxiety.

Our study also explored the roles of Presence of Meaning (PM) and Search for Meaning (SM) two key dimensions in existential psychology. Interestingly, a strong sense of PM may function as a buffer against existential distress by providing individuals with a stable, guiding life narrative. On the other hand, the SM may reflect a dynamic process of exploring life's purpose, which could either support personal growth or signify ongoing existential conflict (Mandalaparthy & Abraham, 2021). If women in our sample scored higher on both EA and SM, this could suggest that their anxiety is not merely a sign of pathology, but an indicator of deeper existential engagement a willingness to wrestle with difficult, meaningful questions in the pursuit of a fulfilling life.

This interpretation is supported by Frankl's (1963) existential theory, which posits that existential anxiety is a natural consequence of living a conscious, reflective life. According to Frankl, suffering often arises when individuals feel disconnected from a sense of purpose, but the very act of searching for meaning can be a transformative process that fosters resilience and psychological growth. Therefore, women's higher levels of existential anxiety may reflect vulnerability and strength, opens to exploring lives deepest questions even amidst uncertainty.

These findings carry important implications for mental health interventions. Recognizing that existential anxiety may manifest differently across genders can help clinicians design more tailored and empathetic therapeutic approaches. Therapeutic models such as logotherapy, existential psychotherapy, and meaning-centered therapy are particularly well-suited to address concerns related to life purpose, autonomy, and personal values. These modalities can support individuals especially women in transforming existential distress into meaningful self-discovery and life integration (Mandalaparthy & Abraham, 2021; Wadhawan et al., 2021).

In summary, the gender differences observed in this study underscore the complex interplay between emotional, social, cultural, and biological factors that contribute to existential anxiety. Rather than viewing EA purely as a symptom to be eliminated, it may be more productive to see it as a potential gateway to existential growth, especially in individuals actively seeking life's meaning.

Chapter – 5

Conclusion

This study explored the intricate relationship between existential anxiety and meaning in life, focusing particularly on the dimensions of presence of meaning and search for meaning, with an emphasis on gender differences among young adults. Utilizing standardized psychological measures and robust statistical analyses, the findings offer valuable insights into how young individuals navigate and respond to existential challenges within the context of a rapidly evolving world.

Relationship between Existential Anxiety and Meaning in Life

The research found a clear negative link between existential anxiety and the presence of meaning. Young adults who already feel their lives have clear purpose and significance tend to experience much lower levels of existential worry. On the other hand, those still actively searching for meaning, especially without finding it yet, reported higher levels of anxiety. These findings underline how crucial a strong sense of purpose is for emotional stability.

Gender-Based Differences

Noticeable differences between genders were observed. Females tended to report greater existential anxiety compared to males, suggesting that gender can influence how existential struggles are processed and felt. These differences highlight the need for gender-aware approaches in counseling, research, and mental health programs aimed at young adults.

Factors Contributing to Existential Anxiety

The study pointed to several contributors to existential anxiety among young people, including educational pressures, expectations from family, financial uncertainty, and social media-driven comparisons. These factors often interrupt the natural development of a stable life purpose, leading to deeper feelings of disconnection and uncertainty.

Practical Implications

Findings from this study suggest the importance of promoting activities and interventions that help young adults build a strong sense of meaning and resilience. Teaching young people how to address existential fears and encouraging them to develop a stable purpose could significantly reduce anxiety. Moreover, recognizing gender-specific experiences and cultural influences could make interventions even more effective.

Study Limitation As with any research, there were some limitations. Relying on self-reported questionnaires may have introduced biases, such as participants answering in socially acceptable ways rather than honestly. Also, since the study was cross-sectional, it only captures a snapshot in time, making it hard to determine cause-and-effect relationships. Future studies should consider long-term designs and explore other factors like coping styles and cultural influences that may affect existential anxiety.

Conclusion

Overall, this research adds valuable knowledge about how young adults navigate existential challenges. It shows the important roles that meaning in life and gender play in shaping existential anxiety. These insights can guide the development of better support systems to help young people face life's uncertainties with confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose.

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